

March 1, 1974

FRIENDLY POLICE AT THE GAY CENTER

What dark-haired handsome policeman was at the Gay Center on Friday evening, Feb. 15th, with his boss? The answer is Sgt. William Price. His boss is Captain Carl Ecklund, Jr. and both are from the Public Relations Dept of the San Diego Police. I found both men attractive. However, lest Sgt. Reson or Officer Carey scent a Sex Crime in the offing, let me hasten to add that both men were perfectly correct and all business -- damn it!

The meeting between these representatives of public authority and some fifty or so gay people was about three hours long. The police officers missed another meeting for our sake. It is to be presumed that they did so because they felt their mission worthwhile. I think most of us thought so too.

We shot all kinds of questions at them. Mostly we got answers that dissembled . . . that is, the questions were not answered forcefully and directly but piecemeal and in such a way as to lose the original point of the question. We got no positive assurance for instance that two men walking hand-in-hand in the Park at ten P.M., stopping to embrace now and then, would not be hassled as they are at present. Everyone knows that a man and a woman in the same situation would get no police reaction.

We got no positive assurance that harassment of gay bars or bar patrons would cease; only warnings to the effect that some bars brewed trouble and had to be watched. The underlying attitude of Sgt. Price and Capt. Ecklund was that where there were gay people there potentially were criminals. Sometimes they talked as though being gay itself was dangerously criminal and needed watching.

I feel sure that their dissembling was noted by listeners. It was almost to be expected. After all, they are public relations men. It is their job to stroke us and keep us calm. Relax, Officer Carey! I mean figuratively stroke us . . . not what you're thinking; besides that wouldn't keep me calm!

There was one proposal made which has been made before by many, including this writer. That proposal is the one to include perhaps six required hours of gay sensitization in police academy training, these six hours to be given by a gay person. Such a program might go as follows: one hour introductory lecture; two successive two-hour-long workshops each with a different panel of gay people; then one hour summary. The Captain surprised me by saying that he felt behavior must be changed before attitudes and that therefore he had doubts about the efficacy of such training. Coming from a police officer in a democratic society this is a bit alarming, especially when he has the power to change my behavior however short-term.

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Nevertheless, the Captain promised to suggest such training after stating that most cadets come from middle class background where prejudice against gay people is strong. Without singling out the middle class, we certainly know about the prejudice. And the only way to change it is to show it to be false in front of the conscious awareness of the prejudiced person. That's what training's for.

San Diego's gay community has taken a step up. It now draws a public relations captain instead of a patrolman sex-crimes expert. (Hey. No offense, Dick.) The contact has been worthwhile. It will be really significant if this training thing can be worked out. It takes courage on the part of the decision-makers to innovate. But innovation is the mark of leadership. Can you do it, Chief?

Meanwhile . . . thank you Captain Ecklund and Sgt. Price. Let's keep talking.

--Charles David